

Evidence-Based Interventions: A Guide for States

Livia Lam, Charmaine Mercer, Anne Podolsky, and Linda Darling-Hammond

Abstract

The new Every Student Succeeds Act offers states flexibility to create new approaches to school accountability and to design appropriate interventions for schools in need of assistance. The law states that the interventions should be “evidence-based” and defines the kinds of research evidence states need to provide when choosing strategies for improvement. This brief analyzes the research base and identifies the conditions under which four commonly used interventions have been found to be effective when well-implemented. The four areas are: high-quality professional development, class-size reduction, community schools and wraparound services, and high school redesign.

External Reviewers

This brief benefited from the insights and expertise of two external reviewers: Jessica Cardichon, Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy for Comprehensive High School Reform at the Alliance for Excellence in Education; and Aaron Pallas, the Arthur I. Gates Professor of Sociology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. We thank them for the care and attention they gave the report.

In keeping with the historical purpose of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the reauthorization of ESEA signed into law in December 2015—requires states to direct resources to the lowest-performing schools, leveraging equity by providing support to close achievement gaps.

Unlike its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), ESSA does not prescribe the interventions for these schools. Instead, the new law gives states more flexibility, recognizing that school circumstances differ and the one-size-fits-all remedies in NCLB were not appropriate in every case. States are free to determine the interventions that make sense for particular schools.

At the same time, the law does spell out some guidelines for interventions. Specifically, the law states that the interventions should be “evidence-based” and defines the kinds of evidence states can use when choosing strategies for improvement. The goal is to increase the likelihood that the interventions will succeed in raising performance and closing gaps.

One key issue is that strategies for improving performance—such as professional development investments or class-size reductions—have generally proved successful only when implemented effectively and in contexts that can benefit from what they have to offer.

This brief provides an overview of four commonly used interventions that, when well-implemented, have been shown to raise performance, particularly for historically underserved students. It analyzes the research base and identifies the conditions under which they have shown to be effective. The four areas are:

- high-quality professional development,
- class-size reduction,
- community schools and wraparound services, and
- high school redesign.

What ESSA Requires

ESSA requires states to develop plans to support the “lowest performing” 5% of all public schools that receive Title I funding, all